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LAST WORDS

EVERYTHING, Y'HEAR?

BY RICHARD MELTZER

This is part autobiography and part hard concept, I'm not sure how much of which. If I fudged the presentation and tried to pass the whole thing off as nothing *but* hard concept, y'know, with perfect geometrics, high-contrast lighting and the like, I'd be coloring things a bit grimmer than I mean 'em to be. I mean they *are* grim, mighty grim, a grim which is easily *universal*, but by keeping it first-person a hefty percent of the time I'll be sparing you the onus of it being all that *universally* universal. Or maybe I'm just too old a grouch to bother getting any of this garbage "right" anymore. No matter; I simply believe that EVERYTHING stinks.

Ten, 12 years ago when I was still living in New York, I remember whenever I'd take the subway at peak proletarian hours you could look at all these faces and just see the absolute terminality of it all. The final screaming, gasping misery-death of the Human Spirit. And it ran across class lines, race lines, sex, age, ugliness/beauty, etc. — the whole basic human-generic Trip. And after a while, if you looked hard enough, it would break beyond history lines too. You'd see the great beaten face of generic workaday Despair, of rats-in-a-cage with the burden of *role*, of people in cattle cars to and from *any job ever*. And all these folks en route to ALL possible urban-hysterical 9-to-5 plug-ins would suddenly, as one, be hobbling in chains to go BUILD THE PYRAMIDS.

So like we're all grimly one *eternally*, right? Now, then or always — what's the diff? Okay, sure. Putting at your disposal, if you stuck with the drift, a reversal of interpretive polarities — hardly the *worst* of options as you hung from a strap like a sardine in literal piss-shit. To wit: the casual predication of the Spirit Death of you-name-it *not* on or in recent history, *not* midrange like back a century or a goddamn millennium, but tuxy, way back at the "dawn" (by "definition"!) of the human Situation . . . blame it all, the whole sorry outcome, on Being!

So I did. And it certainly was no less *depressing* than just going along sucking in the standard daily quota of wretched, loathsome sense data ("This before me now is an ultimate horror") (" . . . as was whatever the day before yesterday") (" . . . an et cetera may surely well be come my birthday"); it was just kind of a more convenient way of coding the input. And the day-to-day payoffs were measurable. By chucking the parameter x-could-be-better-(-in-anything-but-"theory") from my grid of analysis, by functionally conceding that nothing *could* ever do more than stink, I was able to take "simple pleasure" in *Gilligan's Island* reruns. And *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the S.S.* on 42nd Street. And crummy football games. And occasional LPs. And occasional rock-roll (live). And getting sick drunk. And adultery.

Ah! youth . . .

These days, though, I find it hard to stick to my guns. Y'know, the Guns of Being. It's kind of like all these kids today who have this romantic attachment to death, I mean Henry Rollins walks around with a dead woman's brains in his knapsack — she shotgunned her head at a K-mart — but what the fuck do they know about physical check-out as a doggedly mundane no-option *given*? They've hardly had hemorrhoids; what primary EXPERIENCE have they had of the entire frigging *machine* slipping to dust-without-metaphor? (Ah!! dotage??) Anyway lately, the last four-five years, I've been finding it increasingly difficult to pin the major portion of my discomfort — Contempo-Cultural Grief — on the merely merciless Primordial. The *specifics* of how some things stink, how they stink *far* worse than ever, have been making me cranky. They've been totally bumming me out.

And I don't really mean some, I mean all. All things, the product-bounty of *all* mass-cultural genera — some would call them "media." They all stink worse every week, every minute, and they all stink *identically*. They've become the same exact bucket of cancer, of heinous, horrible, airless deathspew incarnate. And if not all — literally — we're still looking at all/functionally, the purt-near sumtotal of available scum in the Marketplace. As if people actually "shop" anymore — everybody just *receives*. It's all just so much Approved Get-Off In Sector 3. You've probably seen *THX-1138*, right? — the only thing George Lucas ever shot that couldn't have been done by Disney. Well, remember the scene where Robert Duvall is back from his gig at the whatsis plant, stroking his meat while watching a hologram of this big enormous black woman bouncing and stroking her mamms and stuff, and then once in a while he switches to some kind of Amos & Andy update with this guy banging sticks against a car? Great scene. Well I may be one dim fuck or something, but I can't for the merry *life* of me see the packaged, "marketed" and received experiences of Bruce Springsteen, "We Are the World," *Miami Vice* or Paul Schrader's *Mishima* (for instance) as being of a different basic ilk — or intent — from that of *THX*'s get-off module.

I'm talking by-the-numbers *symptomatic relief*, "pure" and "simple," and if there's a vague iota of intellectual tickle (cum artistic/social "consciousness") thrown in at no extra cost or effort, it's one of inherent danger to *no one*. So the heck *what* if REAL FASCISTS in their generic Castle/Bunker might in fact "prefer," as mass-consumable icon/product, *Rambo*, Miller Beer commercials featuring the Statue of Liberty, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* or the 1985 World Series; the Springsteens, Schraders (Coppolas, Lettermans) are doing these palace bastards' crowd-control handiwork, doing it in *spades*. NO ONE WITH THE CULTURAL POWER TO BE "GENUINELY SUBVERSIVE" WILL EVER AGAIN, it says here, "TAKE THE RISK" (OR EVEN THE MISCHIEVOUS *PLEASURE*) OF WIELDING IT. Not in *this* phase, lifetime, geologic epoch.

Come on, complain a little, goad and *debate* me. Ask me *whuddabout the '50s, all they made was Doris Day films (and Eddie Fisher was the face and sound of music)*. Okay, sure. The '50s were one fucked time to be living, daring or sensitive, and compared to the obvious x's, y's and z's of such an admittedly Darkish Era, today's this, that and the other are to some extent relatively peachy. Fine, right, you bet — except for two basic flies in the transdecade ointment: 1) They hadn't yet *invented* the lies back then, the mega-mockeries of our personal and collective nervous systems writ large, which today's hip-to-the-gills mass-culturists recite to *themselves* as workaday litany, nor had they accessed the failsafe means (or mercilessness) to convince the bulk of *us* that not only is not-x as "good as" x, it *is* x. Never before (in so-called "American" history) has it been so easy to fool all of the people, minus maybe 200,000, literally *all* of the time, and I ain't just talking Stallone and your so-called Republicans.

Like there's people, *many* of 'em, people I actually *know*, who will swear to their toes that Philip Glass is something demonstrably OTHER than Leonard Bernstein visits Nepal and rips off the island of Java. Or that *The Cotton Club* isn't as systematically FULL OF SHIT as *The Helen Morgan Story*, as lamely, unabashedly DEMOGRAPHIC in its "entertainment" motivation as *The Glen Miller Story*. Or that *Desperately Seeking Susan* is somehow MORE THAN an expedient update of *Tammy and the Bachelor*. Or that *The Gods Must Be Crazy* is LESS RACIST than *Harlem on the Prairie*. Or that David Byrne is less EMPTY of content/concept than the Big Bopper. Once upon a time shit was shit, lame was lame, superficial was superficial — and the emperor's new clothes didn't get serious-as-your-life 11-color salutes in hipster fashion mags with compulsory 10-billion circulation.

With square-one reanimation no longer even *hypothetically* conceivable for (2) that Great Emotional Shit Detector which delivered us willy nilly from the *second* half of the '50s (I'm speaking, of course, of rock rock rock and ROLL), we are stuck, mired, DROWNING in a non-ironic '50s of the Soul from which there is not the remotest foreseeable *possibility* of transcendence. Rock-roll was born (and briefly persisted) as an overwhelming force of mind-body LIBERATION; today it is nothing — nothing! — but the dehumanized, shrink-to-fit youth-sop of the STATUS QUO. Springsteen is Eddie Fisher, and so, for what it's worth, is Henry Rollins. Don't sigh to me about these Nazis strong-arming bands out of their oh-so-precious "lyrics"; these fuckheads, the bands themselves, willingly surrendered the music's *lifeblood* — its sound!! (and attitude!) — long ago. Like it was no big deal for *movies* and TV to become the selfsame entity, but for rock to become TV . . .'s all the evidence you need that it's totally OVER.

None of which, for some reason, bothers me half as much as sports figures surrendering the sanctity of their weewee. Steve Yeager's got this clause in his contract where if he starts fucking up on the field they can make him pee in a cup and monitor for not only cocaine but *alcohol*. What do I care about coke? Coke is a joke. But why can't rich grown-up athletes commit recreational criminal acts with the same due-process protection as, say, Jack DeLorean? Why be rich if you can't have expensive au-courant lamebrain pleasures? That they voluntarily sign this stuff away *bothers me*. Although actually, come to think of it, maybe it's good; maybe 13-year-olds with eyes on the NBA will stop and *think about it*. And switch to tenor sax 'cause at least THAT won't keep 'em from sticking stupid things up their nose.

Which is where *I* come in: I listen to jazz. I stay home eight nights a week, listen to jazz, beat off occasionally, read Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner. It takes all kinds. ■

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